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ABSTRACT

A study explored how rural women in the village of Srefultoli, Bangladesh describe, from their own point of view, their experiences with nonformal education (NFE). Feminist research has shown that existing NFE programs in developing countries give women traditional knowledge of family planning, nutrition, and health care, but they do not deal with the need to increase women's awareness of their oppression and exploitation. The study examined whether current NFE programs in this village in Bangladesh give women new knowledge about their current situation in society and in the family and whether these women are conscious of their strategic and practical needs. A social mapping methodology was used to pattern these women's perspectives, and the map serves as a conventional symbol for the "way things are," or perceptions of truth. Findings suggest that rural Bangladeshi women are aware of their socio-economic and political subordination and that they use multiple strategies to resist patriarchal domination. Most of the women see participation in NFE programs as an empowering process. Findings also suggest that rural women wanted NFE programs to provide increased opportunities for income generation, for better access to education, for training to help them become economically independent, and for the conscientization of men, so these other objectives may flourish. These women also had specific suggestions regarding the class time, course design, and courses for men that would enhance female participation and would introduce some changes in men's and women's relationships. Conclusions were that certain more participatory NFE programs may bring meaningful changes in women's lives, and that rural women themselves can best identify their own needs. (Contains 5 figures and 43 references.) (Author/BT)

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APS Conceptual Mapping Project

Research Report No.12

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how rural women in a village, Srefultoli, in Bangladesh describe from their own point of view their experiences with nonformal education (NFE). Various feminist research has shown that existing NFE programs in the developing countries give women predominately traditional knowledge of family planning, nutrition, and health care. But their characteristically narrow developmental focus does not deal with the need to increase women's awareness of their oppression and exploitation. I examine whether the current NFE programs in this rural village in Bangladesh give women new knowledge about their current situation in society and in the family and whether these women are conscious of their strategic as well as practical needs. I used a social mapping methodology to pattern these rural women's perspectives and the map serves as a conventional symbol for the "way things are," or perceptions of truth. In these maps, the women's voices that had never before been heard have been made visible.

This study discloses that rural Bangladeshi women are aware of their socio-economic and political subordination and that they use multiple strategies to resist patriarchal domination. Most of the women see participation in NFE programs as an empowering process. But findings also indicate that rural women wanted NFE programs to provide increased opportunities for income generation, for better access to education, for training that could help them become economically independent, and for the conscientization of men, so these other objectives may flourish. These rural women also proposed specific suggestions regarding the class time, course design, and courses for men that would enhance the women's participation and would introduce some changes in men and women's relationships. The study concludes that certain more participatory NFE programs may bring meaningful changes in women's lives, and that rural women, themselves, can best identify their own needs.

Mapping Rural Women's Perspectives on Nonformal Education Experiences

> I think, underneath, all women are feminists. It's just a matter of time and encouragement.
>
> (Susan Faludi, 1991)

The Knowledge Problem

This study explores how rural women in Srefultoli, a Bangladeshi village, describe from their own point of view their experiences with out-of-school, i.e., nonformal education (NFE). Various studies, particularly feminist research, (Antrobus, 1989; Bhasin, 1991; Stromquist, 1988) show that the existing NFE programs in developing countries give women predominantly traditional knowledge, that is, knowledge of family planning, nutrition, and health care and tend to address primarily the short-term by emphasizing the need to meet women's practical needs. Feminists' texts argue that such a narrow developmental focus does not deal with the need to increase women's awareness of their own oppression and exploitation. Many critics of educational planning and policy, including Bovinic (1984), Leacock et. al., (1986) and Stromquist (1988), showed that when NFE projects for women failed, that failure was often related to the exclusion of women in the design as well as in the implementation of the project and that planners did not consider women's perspectives. When attention was given to women, women's strategic needs were not addressed, and they were treated as "vulnerable groups" whose basic needs were confined to the domestic sphere (Stromquist, 1996). Fregeau's (1991) and Duza and Begum's (1993) research indicates that rural women are conscious of their strategic needs as well as their practical needs and, further, that women can identify their needs.

In feminist discourse, a recognition of women's voices and needs are seen to be integral to the processes of social critique and transformation. Feminist research also focuses on the need to empower women in all aspects of life in order to abolish existing inequalities in the family and in society. This discourse contends that education can empower poor women by providing them with opportunities to understand their own situations. Feminist texts also contend that NFE valorizes local knowledge and "works collectively toward producing knowledge by starting from where people are situated and working to develop a broader understanding of structures and how they can be transformed" (Walters, 1998, p.440). Through education women in poverty can understand that the cause of their oppression is not necessarily a consequence of their own ignorance and/or laziness but of the oppressive and exploitative system under which they live. Understanding the reason for their disenfranchisement, feminists believe, will free women to learn to develop a critical consciousness of why and how social transformation is necessary for their own liberation. This will then allow them to work as agents of social change. In addition, they can learn new skills to help them along to better understanding and self-sufficiency.

In this study, I examine whether the current NFE programs in a rural village in Bangladesh give women new knowledge about their current situation in society and in the family and whether these rural Bangladeshi women are conscious of their strategic as well as their practical needs. I further examine whether the voices of the rural women, i.e. the intended beneficiaries, are considered during the planning stage and the implementation process of these educational projects. I believe that women need to know that they have the right to be in control of their own bodies' e.g., that they have a right to determine the number of children they can have. They need to know that they have a right to challenge tradition when it is seen not to be in their best interests. They need to know that it is within their power to bring about change in their own lives. They need to know that they can identify and develop their own projects rather than accept projects handed down by others in the traditional top-down approach. My personal experience as an urban Bangladeshi woman with these rural Bangladeshi women convinces me that women need to understand their own situation and position in society and in the family; they particularly need to have better knowledge about their subordinate condition. I chose to examine village women's voices/experiences in the specific, historical, and social contexts within which these women live and work, i.e. the village of Srefultoli. The recognition of different ideas and multiple realities, I believe, provides a plurality and richness to development analysis. The need is put to show how comparativists can include village women's voices in the ongoing development debate.

My research poses questions which seek to extend the scope of rural development studies. Since the purpose of this study is to explore rural Bangladeshi women's perspectives on their NFE experiences, I need to hear their own "voices" and need to look at their daily activities. I believe that rural women have a different interpretation from that of most educational policy planners about the objectives of NFE programs. On the basis of this belief, I have developed the following three basic research questions:

1. What are the rural women's expectations for nonformal education activities?
2. How do the rural women assess their nonformal education experiences?
    a. What aspects are seen to be the most relevant and beneficial to their lives in the village.
    b. What activities do they want to change?
3. In the specific case of Srefultoli, what obstacles do rural women see that keep them from participating in NFE programs?

Individuals' needs develop out of the social, cultural and economic contexts in which they live. So, it is appropriate to examine women's NFE needs from the perspective of women in the communities where they live. After thorough consideration, I have chosen an ethnographic approach as the most appropriate and comprehensive means of answering my research questions. Stacey (1991) suggests that ethnography fits many of the criteria feminists call for in research methods. It emphasizes an experiential reality and focuses on how people live everyday lives (Stanley and Wise, 1983). The way in which I conducted my research was influenced by my wish to frame my study in the feminist perspective which states that relationship between researcher and "subject" should not be oppressive, manipulative or hierarchical. Most of the interviews were conducted with women while performing their household duties.

The ethnographic narrative is shaped by the nature of its textual organization (Johannsen, 1992). There are many different possibilities for organizing a text, including, but not limited to: mediating on the dilemmas of events, rituals, practices or concepts; recording the progress of an activity; and, interviewing and observing actors or groups over a period of time (Marcus and Cushman, cited in Johannsen, 1992). In organizing my text, I employ the following primary methods of data collection: (1) participant observation; (2) in-depth interviews; (3) group interviews; and (4) document analysis pertaining to NFE programs. Important data came from my own observations derived from my six months stay in the Bangladeshi community of Srefultoli (located in Faridpur district); and through in-depth interviews with twenty women from that village who unveiled their life histories to me, not only as a researcher but also as a fellow countrywoman.

New themes emerged as I collected and sorted the data into domains (Spradley, 1979) covering what the participants expressed as important, the literature on women in developing countries, and the relationship of women's roles to women's needs in nonformal education. I found myself drawn to the radical humanist perspective as I interpreted the data, particularly at the nexus of the feminist and critical theorist perspectives where the two have recently merged. Recently, feminist writers are also using mapping and spatial metaphors to challenge and expose what they see as patriarchal representations and to develop new social maps grounded in feminist experiences (Paulston, 1996). For my study, I mapped the women's different perspectives and the map serves as a conventional symbol for "the way things are," or perceptions of truth (Paulston, 1993; Price-Chalita, 1994). This map may open a new space for rural women in Bangladesh. This new space will appear to provide a self-grounding reality for identity. In fact, the map does not simply itemize the world: it fixes it within a discursive and visual practice of power and meaning and, " because it naturalises power and meaning against an impassive and neutral space" (Pile and Thrift, 1995, p.48). Price-Chalita (1994) states, "Maps can be used as fluid guides for re-working and resisting established power relationships" (p. 243). In this sense, my maps become guides to possible worlds, rather than fixed, definitive statements of the known world.

Women and Nonformal Education in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, the knowledge women receive through the education programs is limited (Islam, 1982). Most women's education has been carried out by the formal education system which is limited to middle and upper-class women and whose main role is the support and maintenance of the existing patriarchal system. Poor rural women have been almost totally excluded from formal education. Instead, they are recruited as a cheap unskilled labor force utilized in the industrialization of Bangladesh. Studies (such as Duza et.al.1993; 1992· Islam, 1982) have identified several factors which prevent women in Bangladesh from attending schools. The factors are: 1.) Discriminatory Attitudes of Parents towards Women's Education; 2.) Social Taboos and Traditional Beliefs; 3.) Low Social Status; 4.) Early Marriage; 5.) Parents' Education; 6.) Poverty; 7.) Religion; 8.) Content of Curriculum; 9.) Inavailability of Schools; 10.) Inconvenient Class Schedules.

While the Government of Bangladesh has initiated some NFE programs for the purpose of increasing educational opportunities and improving the conditions of poor women, these NFE programs, like the formal education programs, help to reinforce women's subordinate position in society. Traditional NFE programs, and particularly the government-offered nonformal development programs for women, do not address the long-term, strategic needs of women and they overlook women's existing socio-economic and domestic roles (Islam, 1982). Studies of NFE programs in Bangladesh show that literacy programs offered by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), particularly offered by women's run organizations, raised the consciousness of women regarding their situation in society and in the family (Kabir,et al.; 1993; Kabeer 1994: Lovell, 1992; Rahman, 1994). Rahman (1994) showed that literacy programs, which apply a participatory approach, enabled women to gain "some voice" and women were also organized against domestic violence through a NFE program in one village in Bangladesh.

The conditions of poor women in Bangladesh have drawn the attention of many conscientious educators and intellectuals, particularly women educators and intellectuals. These female professionals in Bangladesh have set up educational projects for rural women with the aim of helping them not only to critically analyze their oppressive situations, but also to become more self- sufficient by providing these rural women with the knowledge with which to increase their basic skills and to develop a functional literacy. Due to the innovative and radical nature of these female-centered NFE projects, however, these NGOs face powerful oppositions from the government and from orthodox rural Muslims.

In this study, I selected Srefultoli where three NGOs, Saptagram, BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) and Palli Progati, had ongoing NFE projects already in place. Within these three, Saptagram and Palli Progati offer adult education classes along with other development programs. BRAC offers loan and different training programs for women. Saptagram is an organization run by women for women, whose primary objectives are to bring together women, both landless and land-poor, to fight for the right to define their own priorities and to better the conditions of their existence (Kabeer, 1994). Conscientization through adult education classes is an important component in Saptagram's approach. This organization teaches that conscientization takes place through a learning-teaching format in which literacy is taught, not through the convention of using words that have little relevance to the everyday lives of poor people, but rather through a dialogue of words and themes that have a deep resonance. In their NFE syllabus, they not only include many issues of particular interest to women, such as dowry, divorce, oppression, exploitation, family laws, etc. but also they utilize practical life stories and experiences of women. The Palli Progatis' program, in contrast, does not have any gender based curriculum. This organization encourages the teacher for NFE classes to discuss various socio-cultural issues and problems which are seen to hinder women's development.

What is Social Mapping?

Over the past several decades, scholars such as Paulston (1992, 1993,1998,1999) and Burrell and Morgan (1988) have tried to capture the increasingly diverse and fragmented ways that knowledge is

constructed through mapping knowledge perspectives. Such maps are a distinct mode of visual representation that use space to represent space. Paulston (1993) sees the development education field moving from paradigm wars to a disputatious community as the use of knowledge becomes more eclectic and reoriented by new ideas and new knowledge constructs, such as interpretations, simulations, translations, probes, and conceptual mapping. Knowledge has become more textual. The metanaratives of modernity are no longer seen as universal "truth", but simply as privileged discourses that deny and silence competing dissident voices. From this view, there is no overarching grand meta-narrative to explain the world, only a multiplicity of competing perspectives and fragmentations.

Regardless of whether they hold power or are on the margins, the role of social mappers in this postmodern world is to map how actors see relationships and their interactions with other actors in society. According to Kirby (quoted in Paulston, 1996), social mapping provides a way of understanding how sliding identities are created, and how the multiple connections between spatiality and subjectivity are seen to be grounded in the contested terrain between discourse communities.

The advantages of social mapping are: 1.) It aids decision-makers by pointing out ideological choices in research methods and theories, 2.) Because of their openness to multiple orientations, social maps offer a strong ground or basis for new research and for new maps resulting from the knowledge generated by the research. Researchers will not be frozen into one perspective, 3.) Since maps represent knowledge as integrated forms of culture, they have significant potentiality to provide new frameworks for understanding the world and for countering hegemonic claims. Readers may also benefit by seeing society and culture from multiple perspectives, and from discovering how social theories are interrelated, 4.) Social maps have the potential for representing the total area of a large space within a smaller space, so that maps can help overcome the philosophical argument of inclusion and exclusion (Paulston, 1993).

According to Paulston, social mappers do not argue about validity because they understand that others are encouraged to question the spatial relationships of mapped social realities. As such, social maps are imaginative constructs of patterned relations, they are not mathematically correct representations. From this perspective, the social world is not measured, but rather experienced, reported and compared (Paulston, 1996, p.22).

Feminism and Mapping

> *Given the collapse of the cold war with its totalizing stories and the emergence of provocative new ways of seeing in post structuralist , post modern feminist and post colonial studies, the time seemed alive with opportunities to rethink our world, to sail off our brutal old maps.*
>
> *(Paulston, 1996, p. xvi)*

Marchand and Parpart (1995) argue that the modernist struggle for universal knowledge has largely been abandoned. Instead, a search has begun to hear previously silenced voices, and to see the specificity and power of language(s) and their relation to knowledge, context and locality. Usher and

Edwards (quoted in Paulston 1996, p.16) also strongly argue that knowledge is no longer viewed only as positivist data but as integrated forms of culture open to the play of difference in meaning". In fact, in the last few decades feminist discourses have helped to illuminate the importance of multiple perspectives and multivocality. Most feminist researchers and scholars have rejected traditional positivistic way of knowing and doing research when studying women. This is especially true for studies of women of color and of lower socioeconomic status (Etter-Lewis, 1991; Fonow and Cook, 1991; Reinharz, 1992). Feminist research argues, as in this study, that women must be the subject rather than the object (i.e. the Other) of analysis. Feminist researchers also celebrate postmodernism's "emphasis on iconoclastic questioning rather than predetermination, on openness rather than pre-empting closure, on plurality rather than essentialism" (Slater, 1992, p.311). Feminist writers have used social mapping and spatial metaphors to expose and challenge what they see as patriarchal representations and to chart new social relations grounded in feminist knowledge and experience (Ardner, 1981).

As a consciencitized female educator I also see that society is composed of diverse views and interests, and believe that it is not appropriate to use "totalizing" categories within the diversity of interests and views today. Stromquist (1996, p. 226) views that "totalizing categories do exist in society and are often used by dominant groups for the purpose of exclusion. To combat this oppression, one must create counterhegemony or alternative views". Social mapping offers a new way of mapping the validity of women's multiple voices to oppose dominating ("totalizing") ways which repress their world views. From the review of the literature and from my own knowledge and experience, I see that there exists an inequality between men and women in virtually every sphere of society. These inequalities must be addressed at the time of development planning and of doing research on women. Being mindful of this pervasive dichotomy, I show how social mapping methodology can be utilized "to enhance the understanding of feminism as a new social movement"(Ibid., p.244).

According to Paulston and Liebman (1996), the map is the product of its maker. It contains some part of that person's knowledge and understanding of the social system. In the process of mapping meaning, the subject is seen to be mobile and constituted in the shifting space where multiple and competing discourses intersect. The maps I drew for my study (Figure 1, 2 3,4, and 5) are mainly conceptual maps representing a world view I observed from the "insider" point of view. In these maps, the women's voices, which had never before been heard in society, have been made visible. No texts were privileged, and all texts (women's views) were treated equally, i.e., each woman's story was given equal recognition on this map. I also situated myself in this debate and reveal my position by placing myself as the mapper on the map. In this way, my mapping work may be seen not only as counter-hegemonic but, in a larger sense, as anti-hegomonic as well.

Mapping Srefultolian Women's Perspectives:

From the life stories of women in Srefultoli, I have found that more or less all the participant women have similar backgrounds and similar socio-economic, educational and cultural experiences. Based

on the women's narratives, a summary matrix (Figure 1) has been prepared to highlight my observations regarding the personal attributes, perspectives, and advocacy-strategy characteristics of the participant women's texts.

The detailed discussion and summary matrix of the characteristics of the texts are again transformed into a map (Figure 2) to project the individual participant's location within the broad perspectives defined by their personal attributes and choices of advocacy-strategy measures. Here, Munira, for example, a woman who has experienced very few successes in life exhibits attributes and expresses views that can be best described as an idealist-humanist perspective. Whereas, women like Firoza, Jakia and Jasmin represent a group that, compared to Munira, can be identified with rather different and somewhat opposite characteristics. This is a group in transition, from radical humanism to radical functionalism, exhibiting very firm views regarding the value and need of NFE in improving the status and conditions of women. Their views hinge on pragmatic and action-oriented advocacies. They are quite clear about how to transform women's lives.

Then, there is a group of eight women (Shirin, Monica, Minara et. al.) on the upper left corner of the map, whose texts I have read and located as notable for their forceful feminist views. To them women's liberation from oppressive laws, customs, and practices should be the cornerstone of women's advancement strategies as well as NFE strategies.

Thus, an elaborate discussion on the texts, a summary matrix of the participants' personal attributes and choice of advocacy-strategy modes, and a map locating the belongingness of texts within the broad theoretical perspectives, summarize sequentially the findings of my in-depth interviews and case studies.

The participant women's views on NFE programs are separated from their life histories because some women did not want to disclose their names because of personal reasons and because of social constraints. In the following section I discuss participant women's experiences and perspectives from the world views that construct their texts.

Nonformal Education: The Women's Experiences and Perspectives

The participant women in Srefultoli were highly critical of the local NGOs programs, projects and of their existing activities. They freely expressed views of the local NFE programs offered by NGOs. From their stories and interviews I developed eight domains in which to categorize their various perspectives on and experiences with nonformal education: No experience, no opportunities; Agriculture projects; BRAC; Palli Progati; Saptagram; Samity (Women's groups); Sewing/ crafts/ cottage industry; and, Curriculum.

Text	Observation/Perspective	Textual Characteristics/Advocacies
Reshma bibi	Leader,Organizer	Outspoken, energetic, cooperative, friendly : ask for nontraditional work for women/ change social system.
Rahela	Happy wife	Open minded, cooperative & outspoken, friendly : abolish female oppression, dowry, patriarchal relationship, divorce / need income generating activities.
Mukul	Oppressed woman	Shy: wants women's liberation & education for income
Roqshana	Hard life	Outspoken, cooperative : abolish class divisions in society / should not have any division of labor / education should be both for girls & boys / education for income generation / women can do many things.
Fatema	Happy farmer & mother	Cooperative, energetic : need for more agricultural training for women/ more agriculture extension workers, & education for income generation.
Minara	Semi-Liberated woman	Outspoken : women should have more voice against 'oppresion'/ abolish the dowry practice / women need vocational education & training.
Amina	Active voice	Intelligent : women need education & money to get respect & voice / Practical: should add Islamic studies in NFE programs.
Seuli	Obedient wife	Cooperative : need vocational education for women.
Masuda	Happy family	Open-minded : need courses for agricultural management & training / need Islamic studies in the NFE curriculum to attract more women / need education for income.
Jasmine	Firm determination	Hard worker : need education for men and women/women need education for a good job / women can change their lives & society by themselves/ women need money for freedom & speech; practical.
Jakia	Dedicated to family and organization	Soft but outspoken : education makes women conscious/ women should be united against social injustice / need to include history of famous women / need low cost medicine for domestic animals/ need income generating activities.
Sakina	Hard and unhappy life	Quite tone : women are insecure / women need real protection/ education for girls is a must / without education women are like the blind/ men treat their women as slaves.

Figure 1: Summation of Participant Women's stories and views

Text	Observation/Perspective	Characteristics/Advocacies
Shirin	Leader	Outspoken and a leader : veil should be in the mind, not outside /early marriage should not be encouraged.
Monica	Liberated, learner and teacher	Active voice, firm determination :education for mothers is more important than fathers / emancipation of women and men /religious leader's work seen as an impediment to women's progress.
Maya	Proud business woman	Smart and determined woman: education and earnings give women their own " voice" and hope for structural renewal.
Firoza	Self made woman	Pragmatic and open-minded, hard working, firm determination : if women do not earn anything, they will not get respect from the family / change social system.
Dina	Single and widow	Shy, soft spoken : women's education is urgently needed to secure employment.
Suriya	Happy wife, nationalist	Critical; the rich exploit the poor / exploitation and discrimination of women are very common in society and need to change / NFE curriculum should include a history of the war for liberation in Bangladesh.
Munira	Frustrated	Shy : self advancement is important.
Beuty	Oppressed woman	Shy, soft: men leave their wives in village and take other women in the town / women must know the marriage and divorce law / rural women need basic education.

Figure 1: Continued

Fig.2: This map situates women in Srifultoli according to the space of their life histories and their world views.

No Experience, No Opportunities

All the participant women in Srefultoli realize now that without education, there will be few if any opportunities for them and for their children. These women are also concerned about the lack of formal education for their children, particularly for their daughters. The high cost of materials and transportation are responsible for many young girls dropping out of their village elementary schools. Although primary education is free for all, books and other education-related materials and transportation costs must be provided by the parents, so it becomes difficult for many to pay the costs. Poverty is one of main reasons that many parents do not send their children to school. The family's demand for female child labor to take care of siblings and to do household work is another reason why girls drop out of school.

Sometimes women who are willing to attend the NFE training classes do not participate because the courses and programs are not seen to be financially beneficial to them. Sometimes, when women ask for a particular course or training related to earning income, their requests are denied. Rahela, one participant, stated, for example, that "The training courses offered by some NGOs are not worth anything. Food preservation or how to take care of domestic animals is not what women needed." She also added that women in Srefultoli needed some productive training or courses which would prepare them to earn some cash money. All participant women supported this view. When some NGOs refused to offer any sewing courses because they viewed that it would not be cost effective, the participant women replied that "Without opportunity and experience, how can we come to that conclusion?" These women want to be challenged.

Some women complained also that when NGOs offer any training, either they are not informed or classes are scheduled at a time when they have to do their household work. Women need to know in advance about the training so they can prepare themselves for that. Some women miss the training which they think, is important for them. "We could never attend any training, but we would love to", they added.

Agriculture Projects

Most participant women in Srefultoli have experience in agricultural work. They help their husbands during the harvest time. However, these women's involvement in agricultural work did not provide any extra opportunity to participate in agricultural projects offered by the government or NGOs.

Women participants in this study who were directly involved in agricultural work expressed interest in agricultural training programs. They expressed their desire to learn more innovative techniques and processes in agriculture that would save them time and energy and could help their husbands more. Some participant women also argued that they do not have sufficient space for growing vegetables on a large scale, therefore, these groups prefer to keep domestic animals.

Some informants stated that the organization, particularly Saptagram, supplied crop seeds but the supply was irregular. They also pointed out that irrigation was a problem in Srefultoli especially in the winter season when the water dries up. These participant women suggested that providing them with some foot pump machines at a low cost would solve their irrigation problems and at the same time, help to fulfill the NGO's objectives.

Bangladesh Rural Advanced Committee (BRAC)

BRAC is the NGO that has the most contact with the rural people in Bangladesh, and was the most commonly criticized agency among the participants. One of my informants complained to me that,

> "BRAC"s loan policy is very tough. If you can not pay your installment, the agency people will force you to pay back your loan. They do not care how you are paying. They care only about money like Grameen Bank [a bank which gives loans to landless rural people, mostly rural women, outside the usual banking rules and procedures and rescue them from village money lenders who traditionally supplied about four-fifths of the total rural credits]. If you can not pay your installment, the field officer will come to your house and wait [a] whole day for money."

Some participants believe that all agencies are the same: they give loans to those whom they like or to those who are rich and can pay them back. They also add that, at first, this organization gave loans to all women according to their needs, but later, the BRAC people began to show preferences to some groups or certain women.

These women also view that BRAC should offer adult education courses which are practical for meeting women's needs, such as courses for agricultural management training and job training courses.

Palli Progati (Village Development)

It seems to me from my conversation with some participants who were involved with this organization that they were happy with it because this organization provided *tins*, a silvery white metal used for roofing houses, and latrines, at a very low cost. This organization offers sewing training to women. After training, these women either look for jobs or sometimes Palli Progati places them in a garment factory in the main city if the women show an interest.

Palli Progati supplies plants for women to make their own nurseries. One of the participants said, "This agency has good policies but they do not have enough funds. This organization also plays a considerable role in the lives of rural people in this village. They are the only organization here in Mrigi *mauza* [defined area] where you can think of making a nursery". She also thinks that the adult education they offer is also good. "They talk about women and women's oppression, which I believe is part of our life", she added.

Saptagram Nari Swanirvar Parishad (The Seven Villages Women's Self-Reliance Movement)

Saptagram Nari Swanirvar Parishad, in short, Saptagram is the most popular NGO programs among the rural women in the Faridpur area. Through educational programs, this organization gives credit to women. Most of the informants are, to some degree, happy with this organization because of their flexible loan repayment policy. All my informants said that they have got their voice through Saptagram because, before going to their NFE classes, they did not know how to talk to other people. Now, however, they can express their views and opinions.

Rahela, Reshma, Minara, and Monica, are the few among many who informed me that they have established their rights in their families. They have a voice because of their education and the knowledge provided by this organization. They discuss family planning with their husbands, and decide about future children. Now they feel that the women have become more strong and confident. They all informed me that they have overcome some domestic problems, such as their husbands' abusive behavior. For example, their husbands used to beat them without any reason or their husbands wanted to divorce their wives without any valid reason. So, these participants think that they now know what they should do if their husbands try to commit any of these offenses again. Also, they believe that by NFE classes, they know well the value of civil marriage registration [without registration, a husband can divorce his wife any time without any reason because of lack of proper document or conditions of marriage]. Before, marriage was performed by the local *imam* (priest) but now they are aware of the consequences of that kind of marriage. According to them, they have more control over their own body and mind than before.

Some also expressed their frustrations and angers with Saptagram and demanded tube-wells from this organization. They complained that this organization promised to give them tube-wells soon but did not keep their promise. The participant women also expressed their frustrations regarding their education program. These women think that with their current level of education, no woman could generate any income, therefore, they demanded vocational education in addition to their existing curriculum.

Some informants, particularly those, who are from middle class families, believe that the education this organization offers is anti-Muslim and anti-men. These women think that NFE education teaches rural women not to follow *purdah*(veil), but other informants protested that statement. They informed me that NGO people had taught them (which they believed) that purdah is a state of mind and need not exist outside one's mind.

Samity (Women's Groups)

Many organizations prefer that women work in groups in order to receive credit or take part in projects. Credit is one of the main motivations for forming *samity* (groups). Women's groups are seen to be very successful in the rural area of Bangladesh. Ranging from getting a loan, to planning protests against women's oppression, or simply to help each other, women are now organizing themselves for different needs and purposes.

One of the group members said, "We organized all the group members to protest different women's related issues. We organized and demonstrated against a rape case, and the *talaq* (divorce). We can organize women anytime when needed". Another group member told me that she was attracted to the group not because of the loan, but because she could learn so many things about women's problems and world news. She felt that all women are equally oppressed and exploited.

Firoza, one participant, was not very optimistic about the Samity. She said that women do not work well in groups. They fight. But immediately one participant, Maya, protested, "Sometimes there are some conflicts within the Samity because of men. Some men send their wives to school just for getting a

loan and they can not repay, or sometimes it happens that one group gets a loan from the agency but another group does not because they could not pay off their previous loan". Maya added that that men often put pressure on their wives to get a loan or leave the Samity. But through the group, they were doing many projects. For example, they bought land with their loan money and cultivated that land, and "whatever we get, that is our profit", she said. Most participants prefer to receive an individual loan rather than a group loan through the Samity.

Sewing/Handicraft and Cottage Industry

"What we need in this village is a teacher to teach women handicrafts and sewing and agricultural skills. We have different samities. All the women want to earn money. They all are willing to do work." Roqshana expresses the needs of all the women in Srefultoli.

All participants I interviewed wanted education and training to provide them with skills to earn an income which would free them from their dependence on men and would give them the ability to adequately support their families. Minara expressed her feelings this way, " I strongly feel that without money, we can not earn any freedom. Women will be oppressed all through their life if they do not earn anything." These participants wanted to learn sewing and handicraft work, so they could work at home or in a nearby center. They wanted to work in any industry such as cottage or garment or sericulture industry, which would be near their village. They demanded vocational education besides their existing curriculum. They also thought that the NFE programs of Saptagram or some other organizations could attract more women and men if they offered sewing or some other handicraft courses useful for income generation.

Some participants made it clear to me that if any organization offers any potentially lucrative income generating program or training, they will join them. They do not care about whether that organization gives credit or not.

Curriculum

All the participant women in this study valued the curriculum of the Saptagram's NFE program because they viewed it as relevant to their own daily life. A typical topic discussed would be "Ajmat Bibi's Life Story." It is the story of an oppressed woman who was abandoned by her husband and how she changed her life. Participants believe that this kind of story is for the most part real. They believed that they were not only learning basic skills through Saptagram but also being exposed to different issues concerning women which every woman should be aware of in order to establish her rights in society and in the family.

Some suggested the inclusion of a history of famous women's lives and contributions in the curriculum in order to increase women's self-esteem. One informant indicated that women should know the history of Bangladesh in very short and easy language, particularly about the liberation war. Few women have any knowledge of the war for liberation and some participants believe that if women learn this history, it will increase their social and political knowledge.

Problems Identified and Solutions Suggested

It is a standard policy for development organizations to formulate or design programs for poor, uneducated villagers from the top down, using an educated "expert." However, such experts rarely give consideration to rural people, particularly to women and their interests and needs. The assumption is that rural women do not understand their own needs. Experts believe that they are better able to identify and solve rural women's problems than the rural women are. However, I believe that my interviews with the rural women in the village of Srefultoli reveal just how capable rural women are of identifying their own problems and of suggesting relevant solutions to those problems.

As a result of this research I have categorized the problems and needs identified by the women into six different areas, including, Cultural and religious issues; Girls' education; Conscientization of men; Project financing; Women's own inferior perception; and other social problems.

Cultural and Religious Issues

Culture and religion have long played an important role in subordinating women in Bangladesh. Village people are more orthodox and follow religious traditions more closely than people living in urban areas. Most of the rural people misinterpret the religious traditions.

One of the participants expressed her feelings thus:

> There are deep cultural problems in a village. Men always think they are superior and women should be under their feet. Women here are the most marginalized in all respects. Men do not want their wives to go outside for work. It seems that it's a matter of male prestige. They want their wives to follow purdah. If anybody does not follow purdah, she will go to hell. But we believe that purdah is in our mind, not external.

Reshma Bibi, the leader, thinks that most women here depend on their husbands for income because of their traditional attitudes. Those women are obliged to do what their husbands say.

All the women informants reported that their husbands were concerned about the curriculum because the topics of this education covered many social issues for women such as women's oppression, women's liberation, women's equal rights, dowry, the divorce system, etc., along with the more traditional basic education classes. Most men in Srefultoli thought that this education would take their women out of their houses and would make them revolutionary and that consequently, their marriages were going to end. They thought that such an education would encourage women to abandon *purdah*, which would deny their culture and religion. That's why some participant women suggested that the NGO should introduce some religious studies beside their academic curriculum. It will also help to attract both men and women and might also clear up some misunderstandings about religion as well. In Masuda's words, "When the agency staff talk about irrigation system, training, or family planning system, the rural people who do not have any education think that these are anti-veil systems. Since it is not easy to change our system overnight, the agencies should introduce something which is related to religion."

Need For Girls' Education

"We want our children to be educated, so we can have good leaders to keep our society good. I know also that it is best to have only two children". A participant, Beauty, strongly believes this as well as the importance of educating children, particularly girls. In general, almost all women agreed with Beauty regarding education for their children, especially for their daughters. Young and middle-aged women feel the necessity of education for their daughters because they do not want to see their daughters become dependent upon their husbands as they feel themselves to be.

They identified lack of girls' schooling as a major problem in Srefultoli. Since there is no school for girls nearby, if they want to send their daughters to school, girls need to walk a couple of miles. One informant added that she was very interested in sending her daughter to school, but her daughter of fourteen/fifteen years could not walk by herself because the young men bothered her by chasing after her and asking to marry her.

Conscientization of Men

The participants strongly argue that no education or opportunity will change their status without a dramatic, substantial and basic change in the attitudes of men. Therefore, these women in Srefultoli believe that if men can be educated to change their outlook about women, they will value women's education. They need to be taught to take equal responsibility for their children and recognize that women have the same rights as men. All informants expressed their desire for better understanding between men and women, and they believe that in order for that to happen, men should be re-educated. The women participants, like feminists, (Leacock et.,al.1986) recognized patriarchy as perpetuating their subordination. Some participants think that since men's attendance is low in the adult education class for men [offered by Saptagram], more men should be encouraged to attend classes. They add that the reason for the low percentage of men attending is their dislike of Saptagram's curriculum. All participants strongly believe that the consciousness of men must be raised for the general social well being. Monica, the learner teacher, expressed her views: "The emancipation of women is only part and parcel of the emancipation of society as a whole. So in order to emancipate women, we [women] need to emancipate men, too."

Project Financing: Loans or Credit

Since most loans or credit are usually given to a group instead of being given to an individual woman, a lack of money is the major problem for those participants who want to be involved with a project independently. All the participants in this study have ideas about doing some kind of business that could earn them a living, but they are all facing serious financial problems. All the women participants indicated that if they would get personal loans, they could start doing some kind of personal project. "I think that it [i. e, a personal loan] will also be good for keeping personal relationships. If someone is unable to pay, it is her responsibility and the organization will not put pressure on the other committee members for that", Maya adds.

Women's Perceptions of Inferiority

These women's perceptions of a "woman's status' are still affected by numerous daily practices, often based on taboos, superstitions, religious beliefs, or even misinterpretations of religious tenets, that continue to have a stunting effect on their personal development, assertiveness, and participation in the life around them. Some informants discussed how the attitude of women is sometimes negative. Jasmin added that one of the problems of women in this village is that women feel that they are inferior-that they can not be like men, that their brains are not good as men's brains. Reshma and Roqshana state that timidity is also a problem, that they have a fear of speaking. But once women become aware that they have the same brain as men and that they can have the same education, then they get back some of their self-confidence.

Monica suggests that the traditional male dominance, the tenet of male superiority, is the most disabling custom of all. Restricted mobility, inferiority, and total economic dependence are but a few of the factors created by a patriarchal culture/society that demands women and girls be submissive. She suggests that women can overcome these problems if they know their legal rights and get an education. NFE programs for women are helping women to overcome some of these problems. She adds that women must also have the opportunity to gain more autonomy and self-confidence.

Other Social Problems

The participants identified some problems women face in the village in general and in the Srefultoli area in particular. There are as follows: (1.) dowry; (2.) bad condition of the roads; (3.) lack of security; (4.) scarcity of tube-wells; (5.) lack of electricity; (6.) lack of information; (7.) no recreational facilities; and (8.) lack of employment. Srefultolian women also have identified some obstacles which most women face in attending nonformal education and training programs: the negative attitudes of men towards NFE programs; over-loaded household responsibilities; a lack of time; poverty; lack of a day- care system; lack of interest; and age.

Figure 3 shows how women in Srefultoli see the impact of NFE programs on their lives. From this figure, we see that the NFE 's impact on women in two ways: gradual/incremental and radical. From the incremental perspective, women are becoming social which give them some mobility (women's mobility was always restricted). These women share their sorrows, pain, and ideas with each other. Additionally, they support each other as they become wage earners. From the radical change perspective, we see women talk about their rights, know about basic family laws, become involved with decisions about family planning and the family budget. This has increased their confidence regarding their own lives, and their children's lives. NFE gives them a voice against social and family injustice enabling them to participate in the village court which was quite unthinkable for these women only a couple of years ago.

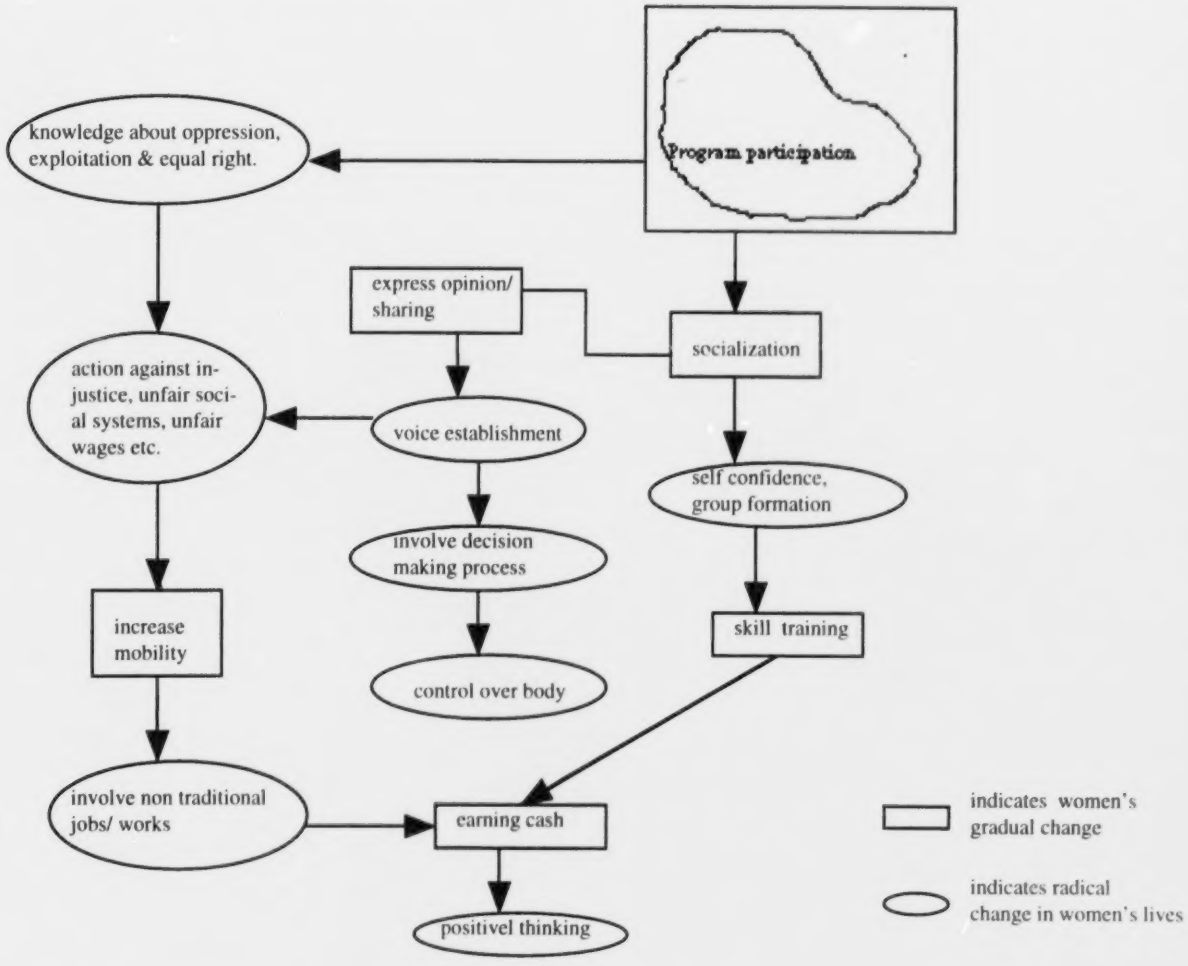

Fig.3: This diagram shows how women in Srifultoli see the impact of NFE programs on their lives and bodies.

Emerging Themes

> *When a woman gives her love, as most do generously, it is accepted. When a woman shares her thoughts as some women do graciously, it is allowed. When a woman fights for power as all women would like to, quietly or loudly, it is questioned.*
>
> (Hillary Rodham Clinton, 1995, Beijing Conference)

Based on the data and insights gained from the various qualitative techniques that I employed, certain themes emerged in response to the research questions posed. Now, I will discuss the themes which emerged from my participants' stories, views, and perspectives, present my own observations, and also assess the reviewed literature and development issues. I will determine which programs my informants view as most appropriate to the development of women, in general, and in Srefultoli. I also explore the needs that women believe must be met by the nonformal education programs in Bangladesh.

The four themes that emerged are; (1) "Men control everything in this society"(gender); (2) "The rich exploit the poor" (class); (3). "Knowledge is not enough"(needs); (4) "If women are united, they can solve many problems" (voice).

Gender : 'Men Control Everything in This Society'

(a). Men want to preserve their power:

All the women participants in this study believe that men control everything in the society. Men hold onto their traditional beliefs which perpetuates their domination and protects their ego. They want to preserve their power by any means. As an example, women in Srefultoli were introduced to different kinds of nontraditional work such as construction work, digging and cutting earth and carpentry activities, tasks which are usually reserved for men in Bangladesh. Some women are also engaged in small businesses, teaching or other work. The participant women expressed that men (i.e., husbands) did not like to see their "women" engaged in nontraditional work. The men thought that these were areas of work in which men should dominate in Bangladesh. Therefore, women should not be involved in these sectors. Women participants also believed that men felt their power and egos were threatened.

(b). Patriarchy obstructs women's development

The female participants thought that patriarchy still dominates society, although the society has progressed during the course of their lifetimes. All the participants echoed that social constraints, resulting from patriarchy, are the major reason why women are obstructed from participating in NFE programs.

Their life histories show how the patriarchal social system does not allow women to participate in formal schooling. Indeed, these women see themselves as trying to free themselves from this dominant patriarchal system by gaining knowledge through the NFE programs. Still, they say, they remain trapped in traditional and subordinate positions. A majority of the women said that they experience great disquiet as a result of trying to liberate their oppressed voices. Most husbands do not want to accept the participation of "their" wives in educational or public spaces. But these women believe that the next generation of women

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will be better educated to fend for themselves and that they will understand better that they need not accept oppressive relationships.

(c). Men need to change their attitudes towards a woman's place in society

All the women I met and interviewed reported that their husbands raised many obstacles when they tried to attend NFE classes and training or do any nontraditional work. They also reported that their husbands' negative attitudes towards their education reflected a deep-rooted fear that education would lead them (women) to become independent and "uncontrollable."

The participant women believe that the only way to change men's attitudes and beliefs is for the government and NGO people to provide progressive education for men which will teach them women's rights, various family laws and other rules and customs in society. This, they hope, will ultimately teach men to value women, their work, and their place in life. The women contend that if the education programs would teach men that women are their partners and not their subjects, men will better realize women's contributions and rights, allow them to go to school, and engage in nontraditional work.

Therefore, most of the participant women recommended NFE not only for women but also for the men, and that schooling should take place in mixed groups. By "mixed groups", the participants meant that if husbands and wives came to class together and exchanged their ideas while learning the same things, it would help to clear up the misunderstandings between men and women. Men might begin to see that women are partners rather than just "wives," or subordinates.

(d). Religious leaders work as an impediment to changing gender roles

The villager's activities in Bangladesh sometimes are based on misleading religious beliefs, superstitions, or taboos, and even misinterpretations of religious tenets and "passive Muslims thoughtless obedience to the *Imam* (Muslim priest)" (Mernissi 1992, p.26). Since the religious leaders play an important role in making decisions and conduct all religious ceremonies about various matters in the village, including marriage, the villagers respect and depend on the religious leaders.

All of the women participants in this study and the NGO workers reported that they met resistance from the *Imam* when programs were begun in Srefultoli and when the women wanted to join in the NFE programs. The *Imam* wanted to keep women in actual *purdah*, while they were being taught that *purdah* is really a state of mind and need not exist outside one's mind. Such teachings are against the *Imams'* belief. The women added that the *Imam* also did not want women's involvement in the *salish* (village court). Their concern is a reaction to the fear that boundaries are being broken down and threatening the security of the social order. This is the same fear behind the movement to keep women veiled and secluded (Mernissi, 1992). According to women participants, the religious leaders tried to legalize wrongful acts against women in and out side of marriage. These women believe that these *Imams* are the enemies of women's development.

Class: "The Rich Exploit the Poor"

Shirin, along with other informants, said that "the rich cause our poverty and the rich people exploit the poor." The participant women say they got this notion from the NGO workers. They added that the NGOs information seemed a reality, so the women were very attracted to the NGO's nonformal education programs.

Before joining NFE programs, women in Srefultoli used to give thumb prints, or tips, in order to get a loan. These uneducated poor women did not know what they had signed (thumb tips are considered to be one's signature) nor what was written on the paper. Sometimes, they were asked to and did sign on a blank sheet. Later, according to my informants, if they failed to return the money on time, the rich took their land whose value was more than the borrowed money. If they protested, the rich people showed their thumb tips as an evidence of contract.

(a). Middle-class women do not get involved in NFE programs

Not all of the women I interviewed showed a positive attitude towards the existing nonformal education programs and training offered by Saptagram or Palli Progati and BRAC. For example, some women dropped out of the NFE programs and some women did not join at all. These women have different perspectives on NFE programs. Some of these women stated that they did not join any NGOs because they believed that it would not solve any of the women's problems, because they have no time, because they are not interested, because the curriculum is anti-religion, because their husbands would not allow them to join, or, because they believe that women will be oppressed all through their lives, no matter what organizations say or teach. Since the nonparticipating women are mainly from middle and lower-middle class families that have some economic solvency and who are orthodox Muslim, it would seem that economic solvency and religious beliefs of some middle class families make them less likely to be involved in nonformal education.

(b). 'People on top' (policy makers) never consider the women

Although all the NGOs in Srefultoli seem much concerned about the involvement of women in NFE projects, there is slender evidence of any efforts to involve women in the project planning process. One informant remarked sadly that village women are always considered to be poor and illiterate, since "the people on top" (meaning the policy makers) were males and never considered women's views or needs.

One participant expressed that opinion in this way,

> Men think that women do not have brains and they are the only persons who have them. As long as men do not change their understanding of women's roles, situations and expectations, it will be difficult to introduce any innovative agricultural project for women. Although women have the potential to apply farming knowledge if they are trained properly, unfortunately most planners, agriculturists, workers and leaders are mainly men who do not expect a lot from women.

They also strongly believe that there are some needs and problems which only the women in the village can identify, so if their own problems are not addressed, what would be the value of education? The participant women in Srefultoli proposed that rural women's perspectives must be considered in planning

and implementing development of nonformal education in order for such education to fulfill the needs of rural women.

Women's Needs: Knowledge is Not Enough

Many feminist texts argue that useful NFE programs for women must provide them with the mix of knowledge and skills that will allow them to be emancipated from unequal labor and social relations (Stromquist, 1994). Women in Srefultoli believe that the knowledge and the training that the NFE programs give women is not enough to emancipate women from their subordinate condition in society and in the family.

a). Knowledge that brings income and freedom to women

"With this education no woman can generate enough income,' said one participant. Like that participant, all the poor women and their husbands in Srefultoli expressed a need for some kind of activity which would generate income. The income from selling milk and eggs or from vegetable gardening is not enough to maintain their families. Some participants even said that the training courses being offered are not worth anything. Since there are no day-care facilities and since husbands tend to have a conservative outlook, many women can not go outside for work. These women said that they would prefer micro-enterprises where women can work in or near their homes and in which the children can help if necessary.

All the women who participated in the study wanted to receive an education that would provide them with the skills to earn enough income which would free them from dependence on men. To them, education and skills are inseparable. Those income-generating courses which the women, themselves, requested from the NGOs were refused on the basis that they were not cost effective. At the same time, these women also say that they value the consciousness raising education which, they believe, helps them counter the exploitation of employers.

Voice: Women Discover Their "Voices" Through Nonformal Education

Literacy is a part of liberation only when it is consciously linked with the process of "rupturing colonial domination, recovering democratic life, or revolutionary triumph." The potential for adult NFE to achieve its full liberating effect is often not realized. Stromquist (1994, p.263) argues that "Yet circumstances can be created to provide the adult educational experience with an opportunity to re-examine old knowledge and produce new wisdom."

Most of the women participants believed that now they can express their feelings and frustrations to each other. Since women share each other's experiences, these women can mobilize other women for protesting social injustices against women. These women in Srefultoli have started going to the *salish* (village court) to establish their voices. Here are different ways the women described to me how they found their "voices" through the NFE programs.

(a). NFE empowers women to use their voices: Feelings of empowerment: I use Stromquist's (1993) definition and dimensions of empowerment for the analysis of women's feelings of empowerment in

Srefultoli through their training and experiences with NFE programs. Stromquist defines empowerment as "a process to change distribution of power, both in interpersonal relations and in institutions throughout society" (Stromquist, 1993, p.2). Her main thesis is that empowerment is a four-dimensional process, and that to act as equal participants in development, women have to be empowered in these four dimensions: cognitive, psychological, economic and political.

Figure 4 graphically represents the relationship between NFE and women's empowerment as revealed by my study of certain women in the village of Srefultoli. This map utilizes N. Stromquist's (1993, 1996) four dimensions of empowerment, but goes beyond the original ideal schema to examine the process-product relationship in various dimensions that affect the lives of women in the Srefultoli context. NGOs, particularly Saptagram consider different themes in their NFE programs such as literacy, dowry, domestic violence, women's right to control over their bodies, patriarchy, family laws, and different social injustices towards women. As a result of their programs in these areas, the women in Srefultoli have developed their critical consciousness and become empowered in the dimensions of cognitive, psychological, political and economic empowerment.

1.) *Cognitive empowerment* involves understanding the subordinate conditions and their causes at both the micro and the macro level of life. Cognitive empowerment calls for the knowledge and understanding of the self and the need to make choices that may go against cultural and social expectations. Knowledge about patriarchal control of the female body including sexuality and abuse, and knowledge and understanding of women's legal rights are key concerns. 2.) *Psychological empowerment* is concerned with women's feelings and the belief that they can change their situation themselves. Psychological empowerment involves reversing the patriarchal order of doing things. This dimension calls for competence in making decisions and the development of self-confidence and self-esteem. 3.) *Economic empowerment* involves the ability of women to engage in income- generating activities that will enable them to have access to independent income. Although involvement in income-generating activities increases the work burden that the women already shoulder, the economic independence they gain is motivation for them to participate. 4.) *Political empowerment* entails the ability to analyze situations politically and to mobilize for social change. Collective action has been identified as an important prerequisite to any meaningful political or social change (Freire, 1972; Friedman, 1992). Through engaging in collective action, women will be able to raise cultural awareness among men and other women and therefore influence change at the social level.

All of the women participants have demonstrated some form of empowerment in these four dimensions. However, the levels of empowerment they demonstrate vary by individual and by dimensions. Most of the women display the greatest sense of empowerment in the cognitive realm followed by political empowerment, then psychological empowerment. The lowest level of empowerment the women have achieved is in the economic realm because of the very limited economic opportunities for them in Srefultoli.

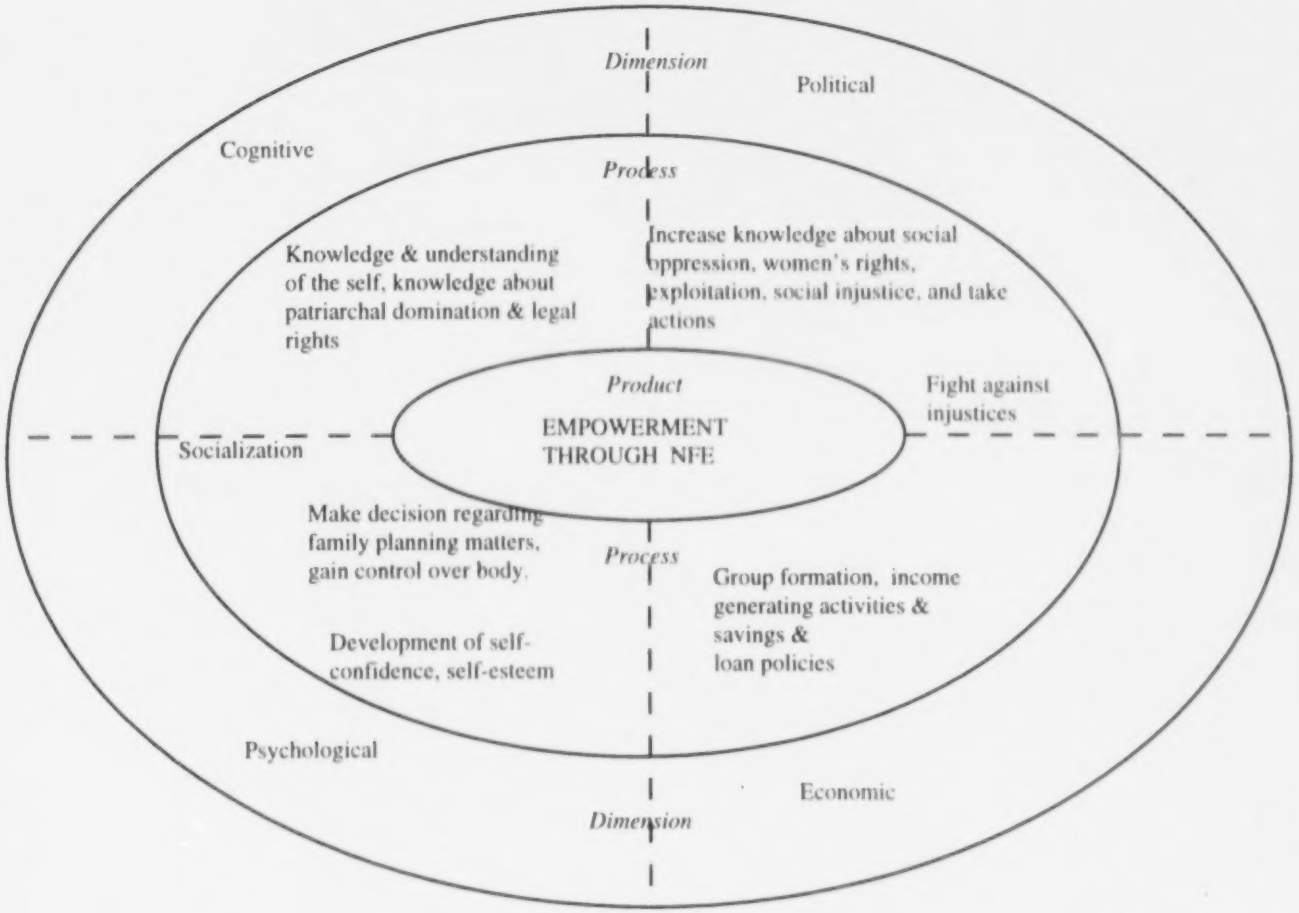

Fig.4: This concept map presents an idealized view of how NFE empowers participant women in the village of Srefultoli, Bangladesh. Adaptation of N.Stromquist (1993, 1996), "four dimensions of empowerment".

(b). *Nonformal education gives women "Voice' against social and political injustice: collective action*: All the participants reported that they are now very conscious about social and political issues in the village. The women participants believe they are gaining knowledge and becoming empowered as a result of joining the NFE programs of Saptagram.

Although their conversations reveal that they think that politics is an important issue, they do not want to be concerned with politics in the beginning of their own struggles. They know who is in power, who are the opposition party leaders, and who will be the best leader in future national elections.

With the inspiration of NGO workers and the lessons learned from the education programs, the participant women in Srefultoli have determined that collective action is important for social and personal change. As Dighe and Jain (1989) put it, "From a state of powerlessness that manifests itself in a feeling of 'I cannot,' empowerment contains an element of collective self-confidence that results in a feeling of "we can' (p.87). These participant women also have developed a "we feeling" among themselves in Srefultoli. These women have protested many social injustices collectively such as unfair wages, wife beating, divorce cases, women's harassment, etc. These participants indicate that because of their collective actions, they have been successful in removing some traditional but illegal systems and prejudices from this society. An example of this is "*hilla*"(In this practice, a husband divorces his wife but then wants to take her back. In this situation the ex-wife has to get legally married to another man for one night and then get a divorce from that man the next day, after which her first husband can remarry her). Another example of injustice is "*talaq*" in which if a husband can utter three times the word "*talaq*" [which means 'divorce'], she will be automatically divorced from that man. Also these women have been successful in encouraging women to register for marriage rather than just going to the Muslim *Imam*. These women also participate in the village "*salish*" (village court), which would have been quite impossible to believe just a few years ago. They feel that they have established their "voices" in the village salish system, through their participation and decision making there regarding various women's issues.

(c). *"Women will have more freedom when they have more education and more knowledge": empowerment for self-confidence*:

Empowerment for self-confidence can also be seen as a type of psychological empowerment. In order to overcome women's perception of themselves as powerless, women need to build up their self-confidence and self-esteem. Since women's theory of self is traditionally limited to a culture of silence (Freire, 1970) because of poverty, patriarchy, domestic violence and other difficulties, critical NFE seeks to break this culture of silence and give them their own space where they have respect, confidence, and determination.

Women participants in Srefultoli claimed that the NFE provided by Saptagram, in particular, has helped them to redefine their concepts of themselves. The lessons that they learned about counteracting power within the organization provided them with vital models for their own lives. They have learned that

their voices count and that they are worthy of being heard. They have also learned that women need to put "fire on their own candle."

The participant women believed that, through NFE, women were able to participate by sharing experiences and learning from each other. Some have changed their attitude towards domestic violence and are no longer willing to accept the myths that " heaven lies under the feet of her husband.' These women now tend to respect other people's views because now they know what it is like to be ignored.

(d). *"Now I know what is right and what is wrong. I know my dues": increased consciousness and awareness about women's rights and oppressions*

Increased consciousness and awareness of one's life and what is going on around one are the first steps to empowerment. According to the participants, NFE programs have increased their knowledge about their rights and the truth about their oppressive conditions. They have become conscious of their individual rights. They expressed the view that the curriculum of NGOs, particularly Saptagram, its teaching methods, dialogues with groups and discussions of women's daily experiences, have helped them to "think as a human being rather than "just a *mahila"* (woman). One informant stated that, "We were blind, and we thought that the world was like what we thought. But it is not the reality. It is something different. Women have a right to input into their families and society."

Women think that they were often denied their rights by the society and by the family. They now understand that they are vulnerable when they are forced to be economically dependent on men, and that they are "being kept underfoot," even though sometimes they have more education than their husbands.. Women now consider themselves as workers while some others consider themselves as breadwinners. The statement of Reshma reflects her confidence, her awareness and her rights in the family: "It is my turn, Apa, ('Apa' means sister) to go out. Let him cook." The majority of these women who have experienced the NFE programs are confident, saying that there is no gender difference in jobs and that women can do what is considered men's work. They say that several years ago, they did not think this way. "Men's earning ability gives them power over women. But women now work like men", Jasmin adds.

(e). *"Income gives women 'Voice' ": the impact of the acquisition of knowledge, and skills on earning power*

" I can go anywhere, anytime now, because I am the breadwinner in my family. My husband does not say anything about that" (Reshma), "I decide my family budget because my husband does not work" (Roqshana), "I do not beg my husband to buy anything for me because I earn". These statements of different women participants in my study reflect that their earning capabilities have given them "voice." The women I interviewed said that their earning capabilities have changed their lives. Now they make decisions with their husbands in planning the family matters and planning for future investment.

In terms of economic empowerment, most participants claim that they are earning some money, but it is not really sufficient. But a few years back they did not earn money by themselves. At least they have some earning sources now. These women firmly believe that the formation of women's groups that

encourage savings and establish loan policies, and above all, the NFE programs guide them to become self-sufficient and help them learn how to utilize the loan money properly.

Women in the village believe that they have improved their literacy, numeracy and networking skills, and have gained skills in reflection and critical analysis. Women started with traditional economic activities and slowly they have shown an interest and confidence in taking up nontraditional employment such as brick making/construction work, carpentry, running small businesses, teaching, working as village doctors and making low cost latrines. Some women also have taken up nontraditional agricultural activities such as ploughing and applying fertilizer. These women say that their self-confidence has increased tremendously. Such empowerment clearly demonstrates the active role some women are taking in respect to gaining control over issues that concern their financial well-being, as well as challenging the barriers of sexual inequality.

Figure 5 is a conceptual map patterning the various perceptions of participant women in Srefultoli regarding their NFE experiences as interpreted within certain theoretical paradigms. This figure gives us the understanding that women have also different cognitive space and beliefs and they are not stagnant in one position. There is a greater sharing of cognitive spaces. There is a fludity of ideas between the various paradigms that results in the "opening of a new world space" (Stromquist 1996, p.245) with changing socio-economic and political structure as well as changing women's potentials. Stromquist (1996) argues that mapping is useful to identify moments at which these spaces are crossed, how they are crossed, or why they are seldom crossed.

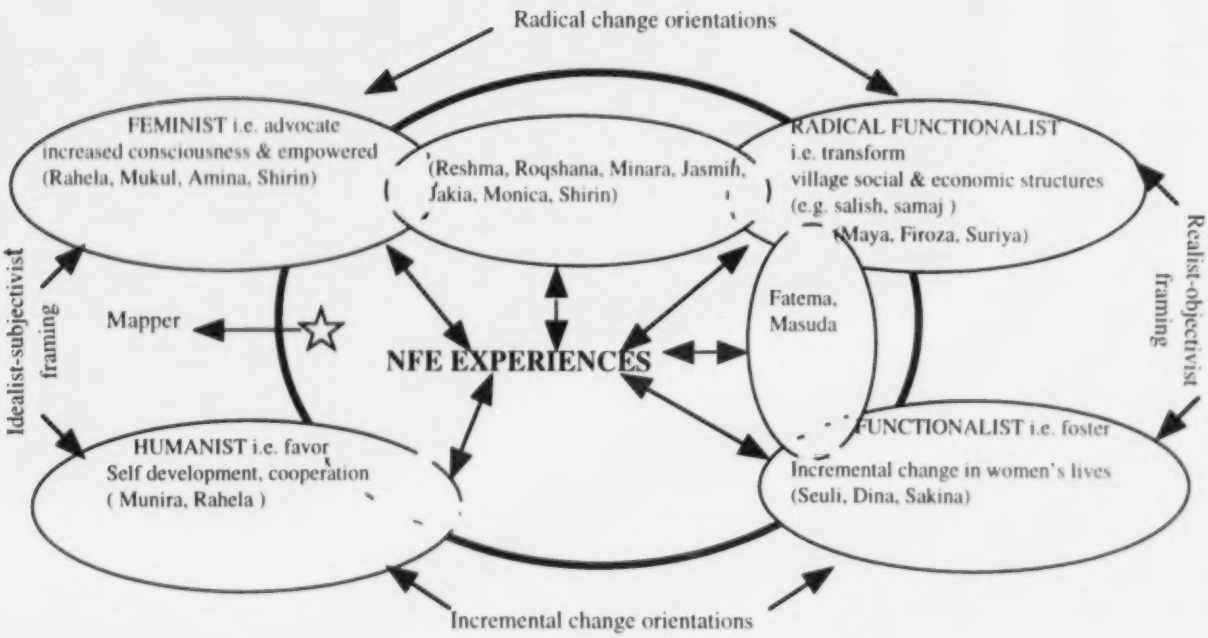

Fig.5: This map situates the participant women in Srefultoli according to their ways of seeing NFE experiences, i.e, Functionalist, Radical Functionalist, Humanist or Feminist. Adaptation from R. Paulston's Mapping Knowledge Perspectives in Studies of Social and Educational Change, 1993, p.24.

Conclusions

It is not likely that women-run NGOs, or NGOs in general, can push hundreds of years of patriarchy out of parliamentary chambers or homes. Women's subordination is deeply ingrained in the minds of both men and women in Bangladesh. One can not dictate self-confidence and self-esteem; one can only provide conditions in which such new attitudes and behavior may emerge and flourish. If NFE seeks the empowerment of women, it must involve women in all stages of NFE project from defining the problems, to identifying proposed solutions, applying solutions, and in assessing project processes and outcomes. Women need opportunities to assert themselves, even to make mistakes. In the long run these women, through their participation, will be able to take steps for themselves and for the sake of others.

Income-generating programs are desperately needed, but they are difficult to implement because they are risky, time consuming and expensive. In terms of economic gain, these women's economic status might not change dramatically, but they need to earn something and gain a degree of financial independence. Yet, because the needs are overwhelming, it is not possible for only one or two NGOs to meet all the economic needs of the village women. The participants' basic and strategic needs can be fulfilled only by utilizing a variety of educational approaches, and being flexible with programs. If the government and other organizations work together, they could better address the needs of rural women in Bangladesh. It would be helpful if NFE curriculum provided women with some kind job market analysis and analysis to help women make more realistic choices about job training.

At the nexus of the critical and feminist discourses is the view that women's voices and needs should be understood as an integral input is social transformation. In this study, women themselves knew better than outside "experts", what types of education would benefit them most. For both practical and equity reasons, women should have a voice in their own development. Accordingly, all organizations in Bangladesh, which focus on women, should respect the knowledge, views, and perspectives that these poor women bring with them to educational and developmental activities. The mapping of these rural women's stories/ discourse will provide a greater understanding of the rich diversity of perspectives in rural settings. Women's knowledge and experiences should be recognized as valid in designing the plans for NFE projects. Such consideration would result in the beneficiaries feeling closer to the program and feeling that they have a stake in their own development. " If you give women the chance, they can do many things and would take over," here Roqshana's statement shows her confidence in changing social position and status. If women are given the chance to talk about themselves and analyze their positions from their own experiences, a collective awareness will develop. As a consequence, the women will be better able by themselves to organize and mobilize for social transformation. The aim of offering NFE from the feminist perspective is to increase women's consciousness which will ultimately transform society and the social system. NFE can become liberating when "it helps the group [women] articulate their problems, dreams, and strategies for action" (Paulston, 1980, p.16).

My study reveals that some NGOs are trying to change gender roles through increasing the economic participation of women. But changing gender roles through consciousness raising without

economic participation has not been fruitful. Education and income are inseparable. The participants' demand for a NFE program that would increase male consciousness may bring some solutions to certain problems, but solutions need to be found to the participants' economic problems which continue to hold women within the subordinating patriarchal systems. Stromquist argues that literacy becomes a felt need after women gain some confidence in upgrading their skills to improve their earning potential but "nothing of this would be sufficient if women are not made to realize that they live under conditions of subordination" (Stromquist, 1994, p. 265).

My study concludes that certain more participatory nonformal education programs can bring meaningful changes in women's lives, and that rural women, themselves, can best identify their own needs. In a rural community (such as Srefultoli) where socio-cultural norms and attitudes exert a strong influence on women's lives, NFE programs for women need to be designed to address women's basic and strategic needs. Nonformal education programs need to be designed to foster the growth of self-awareness for women as well as to foster an awareness of the socio-cultural reality that influences and shapes their lives. Such awareness would enable them to analyze and map their own situation, identify their needs, and develop the ability to transform their own reality. Women should organize and recognize their common needs and goals and draw upon what Faludi (1991) calls their "vast and untapped vitality" to create a more just world.

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